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AUTHOR Downing, Lester N.
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ABSTRACT

This paper demonstrates how the proper use of the relaxation process may: (1) make the counseling experience more fruitful and pleasant; (2) facilitate the maximum functioning of the client; (3) reduce physical and emotional tensions; (4) create a physical condition more conducive to attacking other problems; (5) clear the mind for clear and logical thinking; and (6) promote productive and creative efforts by which worthwhile achievements may be realized. The other discusses the goals and possible outcomes of counseling and the place of relaxation in this process. Much of the paper is given over to the principles and actual mechanics involved in relaxation training. Emphasis is on relaxation as a tool for building self-confidence in the client, as well as on behavior changes. A brief consideration of the limitations of the relaxation process concludes the paper. (Author/TL)

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THE INNOVATIVE USE OF THE RELAXATION PROCESS IN COUNSELING

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Lester N. Downing
Brigham Young University
Provo, Utah

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The value of rest and relaxation as a treatment for disease has been well established by Jacobson (1938, 1968) and followers of his system. Although modifications have been made in this technique, the concept of relaxation continues to attract attention in clinical and educational settings. Experimentation and observation have led to the conclusion that the key to adjustment and productivity is found in the individual's ability to control and fully utilize his own resources and productive capacities. The relaxation process has merit as it contributes to this ability.

A talent, capacity or ability has value to the degree to which its full utilization is realized or to which it adds to the growth of the individual. Excessive tensions or anxieties constitute barriers to full functioning. A reduction of tensions to an appropriate level for efficient functioning then becomes necessary. Relaxation, as learned and practiced in a therapeutic setting, seems to hold considerable promise for helping individuals attain a high level of productivity.

It is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate how the proper use of the relaxation process may:

1. Make the total counseling experiences fruitful and pleasant.
2. Facilitate client growth toward an objective of maximum functioning.
3. Prompt a reduction in physical and emotional tensions.
4. Create a physical condition which permits a more vigorous attack upon any existing problems.
5. Clear the mind for clear and logical thinking.
6. Promote productive and creative efforts by which worthwhile achievements may be realized.

COUNSELING FOR PERSONAL GROWTH

If we believe with Shoben (1965) that counseling is less a matter of solving problems and making decisions and more one of providing a developmental experience, we are better prepared to evaluate any particular technique. The value of counseling as a developmental experience rests with what the client does about himself in response to the triggering and the unleashing of his internal forces. It is within the counseling relationship that possibilities for growth are identified and that self-confidence is bolstered. It is from this condition that constructive action may be taken. Counseling is not so much a matter of what the counselor does, but rather what the experience prompts the client to do. Counseling, then, is a process of dynamic interation between a counselor and a client, characterized by a quality relationship which prompts the client to make optimal use of his resources and his opportunities.

Goals of Counseling

Counseling has as its goals the facilitation of client growth and the maximization of the human potential. This kind of growth contributes to

the individual's ability to find and develop within himself the resources needed to resolve problems and to become increasingly more creative and productive.

The growth realized through counseling helps the client become a more independent, self-sustaining individual. More importantly, this growth should result in the individual's seeing and practicing more logical ways for utilizing the opportunities and resources of the environment. It should also result in behavior which capitalizes upon the individuals personal resources for more effective functioning.

Whether the goals of personal growth and the maximization of the human potential can be best achieved through behavior change, gaining insights, changing thoughts, or assuming greater responsibility for self may not really be known. However, it is known that personal involvement in exciting and promising activities, prompted by high motivation, opens the way to growth and change. Counseling that provides for positive human relationships and an involvement of the individual in working out the course of his destiny should, therefore, prove successful.

Outcomes of Counseling

The outcomes of counseling include a number of conditions with beneficial possibilities for the individual.

1. Behavior Changes. Changes in behavior essential to a fuller utilization of the individual's self and his environment should occur.
2. Greater Self-confidence. The individual should feel a greater confidence in himself, in his judgment and in his ability to function effectively.
3. Useful Insights. Conclusions reached and understandings gained about self, about others and about how best to succeed in society may have lasting influences upon the individual.
4. Greater Motivation. Any increase in the desire of the individual to reach goals, to achieve and to live richly has a profound influence upon behavior.
5. Permanent Growth. Growth with far-reaching possibilities is implied here. Counseling does more than help the person with immediate concerns: it provides the groundwork for continuous personal growth with limitless possibilities.

RELAXATION AS A COUNSELING DEVICE

The relaxation technique is used in counseling for purposes of reducing both physical and mental tension in the client and for bringing the muscles and intellect under the control of the individual. A state of complete relaxation permits a conscious control of the muscles and of the thought processes. This relaxed condition is the opposite of tension, which is a neuromuscular or nervous hypertension "marked by reflex phenomena of hyperexcitation and hyperirritation (Jacobson, 1968, p. 67)."

Relaxation contributes to a reduction of tension and anxieties. It involves an awareness of the individual that the muscles are under his control. This condition permits a flexibility and a mastery of the thought processes not normally achieved by the individual whose muscles are tense and whose mental functioning is reduced by tension.

Training in Relaxation

The client may be taught the relaxation process in a relatively brief period of time. It can be taught in considerably less time than the 100 hours suggested by Jacobson (1968) or in even less time than the six training sessions recommended by Wolpe (1958) and Wolpe and Lazarus (1966). Since we are considering the use of relaxation as a single device in counseling and not as a part of the total desensitization process, we can assume that less time is required.

It is also assumed that with the use of the relaxation process some progress is made toward problem resolution, behavior changes and better adjustment at the same time the client is learning to relax. Attention is directed to the problem during the same session that the client is being taught the relaxation process. After a few sessions and some practice at home, he is able to attain a relaxed state within a few minutes. This condition permits a major commitment of time to the actual counseling during each session.

Purposes of Relaxation

The main purpose of relaxation is to eliminate any condition which places undue stress upon the organism or the emotions. Tension often occurs and persists as a concomitant to one's thoughts. As the individual thinks about his work, problems and responsibilities, or as he anticipates difficulties, he reacts by becoming tense. The physical, mental and emotional efficiency of the total organism is seriously reduced. Productive and useful actions are minimized under these circumstances. Complete relaxation must then be achieved for purposes of freeing the mind of unnecessary restrictions so that it may function freely and effectively. The muscles must likewise be freed of undue tension and rigidity because of the close relationship between the mind and the body. The muscles must be relaxed in order for the mind to function smoothly. Muscle relaxation contributes to a relaxing and a clearing of the mind.

Another purpose of relaxation is to lower tensions and anxieties and thus bolster the self-confidence and self-esteem of the individual. An improvement of the self-image and a fuller utilization of one's capacities are related purposes. More effective human relationships and more productive behavior constitutes the broad purposes of this technique.

More Efficient Functioning Through Relaxation

The attainment of a relaxed state has therapeutic benefits for the

individual as it prompts the amplification of one's capabilities and proficiencies. It is within this attitude of calm that the individual can think and plan most logically. Evidence supports the position that muscle relaxation is a pre-requisite to mental relaxation or to a state of calmness. Physical tension and mental calm, or physical relaxation and mental tension are incompatible. The attainment of a state of physical relaxation permits a rejuvenation of the mind which then permits a free flow of ideas. The person's receptivity to suggestions is increased considerably while he is in a relaxed state.

Rachman (1968) feels that greater emphasis should be given in counseling to the attainment of a calm attitude in the client. This may be accomplished through the use of verbal instructions and suggestions and by the stimulation of imaginary sources of a peaceful, pleasant quality. Relaxation, then, has a prominent part to play in bringing about a state of calmness. Some instructions are directed toward relaxing the muscles and calming the mind. Suggestions may then be made by the counselor to the relaxed client for changes in behavior or for other desired goals.

The Counselor-Client Relationship and the Relaxation Process

The quality of the counseling relationship, the personal characteristics of the counselor and the therapeutic tools of the counselor are all essential to effective counseling (Arbuckle, 1968). The quality of the relationship may thus be enhanced through the use of a technique which is both pleasant and rewarding for the client. As he enjoys the pleasant feeling achieved through relaxation and as he achieves a level of complete and restful calm, the client feels better prepared to deal with his problems. His confidence in the counselor increases and his own self-confidence is bolstered as he becomes better prepared to cope with his problems.

THE RELAXATION PROCESS IN ACTION

The ability to reach a state of relaxation of sufficient depth for purposes of counseling may be acquired by the typical client in about five sessions. Part of the time in these sessions may also be devoted to a consideration of the client's problems. The process may be learned even more quickly if the client devotes a few minutes each day to practicing the relaxation. Relaxation, thus, has benefits beyond the therapeutic hour as it provides for rest from which comes a physical and mental rejuvenation. Longer hours in productive, fatigue-free activities become possible for the individual as he regains his strength and vigor during a brief relaxed state.

Principles in Learning and Applying the Relaxation Technique

The precise methods of the relaxation process may vary somewhat to

accommodate the uniqueness of each client. Perhaps of equal importance to the methods are the principles which underlie this process. An observance of these principles should aid in making the process a rewarding one.

1. Concentrate on Large Muscles. Verbal reference is made to each large muscle group and the client is asked to concentrate on these muscles.

2. Follow a Standard Sequence. Instructions to tense and to relax muscles should follow in a standard sequence. For example, if the facial muscles are used first in the sequence they should be used first each time. The precise number of references in the total sequence should also remain the same. For example, we use ten muscle groups in this paper. Such a routine promotes a rapid learning of the technique and it minimizes the possibilities for confusion which might accompany an unstructured approach.

3. Emphasize a Keen Awareness of Muscles. Most individuals are only remotely aware of their muscles and give them little heed as long as they are functioning properly and giving no discomfort. It may take some time to develop this awareness in the client but the time required to achieve this will be well spent.

4. Stress the Condition of Tenseness. Knowing how to tense the muscles properly is an essential pre-requisite to relaxation. Considerable emphasis should be given to this part of the technique.

5. Reinforce Client's Efforts. The counselor should consistently praise the client for his efforts and minimize the inevitable failures to achieve complete relaxation immediately. He should be made to feel the counselor's confidence in him and to develop a similar confidence in himself.

6. Relate the Relaxation to His Problem. The client's motivation for achieving relaxation will be bettered if he can see the relevance of the technique to a solution of his problems. This can be achieved through suggestions and comments. The idea should be stressed that through relaxation he will become better prepared to deal with his problems.

7. Keep Verbal Instructions in Harmony With Mood and Atmosphere. The sensitive counselor should be aware of the client's moods and any persisting tensions. Instructions may then be geared, both in their nature and in the counselor's tone of voice, to the particular needs of the client.

8. Permit Flexibility Within the Structure. Although a standard procedure should be observed with a client, some flexibility in terms of length of time on each muscle group, instructions by the counselor, degree of verbal participation by the client and amount of concentration should be permitted. Since a warm working relationship is an immediate goal of the counselor, he should avoid any possibility of the session's becoming

mechanical and the counselor cold or indifferent.

Creating a Readiness for the Experience

For the most beneficial results each client should be prepared for the relaxation experience. This preparation may be achieved by making appropriate explanations to him and answering any questions he may have. The counselor might also take him through an abbreviated session for purposes of orienting him to the experience. There is also merit in having an experienced client take part in a modeling session while one or more individuals preparing for their sessions observe.

Once readiness for a session has been achieved the counselor should make certain as to the comfort of the client and the appropriateness of the setting. These preparations are conducive to a quiet, restful, profitable therapeutic experience.

The Mechanics of the Relaxation Process

As an initial experience the counselor may have the client tense and then relax his entire body and get the feeling of extreme discomfort which accompanies such tension. He may have the client fix his eyes on an object or a spot for a few seconds while quiet verbal instructions and suggestions are made. The client will generally close his eyes within a few minutes in response to the quiet, restful mood, or to the counselor's suggestion that he do so. Each set of muscles has a designated number. The counselor may use or not use the number in each case at his discretion.

The counselor may, after the preliminary experiences, follow the steps outline below with whatever minor variations seem appropriate.

The counselor may say:

1. "Let us now concentrate on the lower extremities, the toes, feet and ankles. Tense these muscles...more...a little more...now relax... relax.

2. "Now move to the calf of the legs and the knees...again tense these muscles...hold it...now relax.

3. "Tense the thighs and the hips...hard...feel the discomfort... again...relax...relax.

4. "Note how tense the stomach is and the back. Tense them even more... note how hard the muscles are and how uncomfortable you are. Now relax...consciously control these muscles...tense them again... now relax completely.

5. "Now move up to the chest. Take a few deep breaths while tensing the chest muscles. Now relax...breathe easily...slowly...relax completely.

6. "Now concentrate on the fingers, hand and lower arms. Be aware of your hands...notice any feeling you may have in your fingers and hands. Now tense your hands...your arms...now relax...let your hands drop...note how limp they are now.

7. "Move now to the upper arms. Tense these muscles...your biceps... feel the discomfort and the tension. Now relax completely...make yourself limp all over.

8. "Become aware now of the shoulders and upper back. Relax this area. Now make this area rigid and tense. Note the stress and the discomfort. Now relax these muscles...relax...note how comfortable you are and how pleasant you feel.

9. "The neck is often rigid and the voice is strained because of tension. Be aware of the neck and throat. Tense the neck muscles... harder...harder...now relax. Make certain the voice box is completely free of all tension. Say your name slowly and easily... relax completely.

10. "Now strain the face. Pretend you are in pain. Become aware of these muscles in the face. Now relax completely. Let the face become free and loose. Relax...completely...relax."

The process may then be repeated by moving back from the No. 10 item, the face, to No. 1, the feet. The following directions might be used.

"Now let's move back, making certain we are completely and fully relaxed. No. 10, the face completely relax the face....No. 9, the neck... relax...relax....No. 8, the shoulders and upper back...relax completely.... No. 7, the upper arms...think of these muscles...relax completely....No. 6, the lower arms, hands and fingers...relax these muscles completely... relax....No. 5, the chest...breathe slowly, deeply and easily...relax.... No. 4, the stomach, the lower back...relax...make certain these muscles are completely relaxed....No. 3, the hips and thighs...should be completely relaxed now...fully relaxed....No. 2, the lower leg...loosen the muscles... relax....No. 1, the ankles, feet and toes...beconscious of this area... relax these muscles...relax...relax..."

Suggestions and Reinforcements in the Process

Certain suggestions may be made to the client throughout the session in addition to the suggestions to relax. Reinforcing statements such as, "You now feel very comfortable and better able to deal with your problems.

You are more sure of yourself and more certain of your ability. The course to achievement seems clearer to you, and your determination to make good is now much stronger."

The idea here is to combine suggestions for improvements in behavior with the feeling of renewed energy. The relaxation experience contributes to a recovery of energies and to a clearing of the mind. These circumstances permit a vigorous approach to problem solving and to planning.

Attacking the Problem

Two major courses of action are available once the client is fully relaxed. If the principal objective of the session has been to learn to relax, then the session may be terminated. If, however, the plan has been to deal with a specific problem, this may be done following the relaxation exercises.

The client is asked to identify the problem and to express himself about the problem. The counselor listens, reinforces the client's statements for positive action, and suggests possible action.

In the following example we have used a lack of self-confidence by the client as the problem. Any other kind of problem could be dealt with similarly. Although only the possible statements of the counselor are given in this example, it is assumed that the client will react to the counselor's statements and make some of his own.

"Now you are rested...you are completely relaxed...you feel at peace... you are more confident because you are rested...you are relaxed...you feel good....

"You feel more confident...you can function with self-confidence... because you believe in yourself...you know you are capable...you just need rest....

"You feel more confident because your mind is clear...it has rested... you are more self-confident because you can remember better...your mind is relaxed...no tension... just confidence....

"You are more confident because you know what to remember and what to forget...your mind is clear...it knows what to retain...and where to put the information for recall....

"You are more confident because you are now able to ignore little things...you are rested...pettiness no longer has a place in your mind....

"You are more confident because you are making better use of your time...you are well-prepared...you are able to keep your mind on your studies...you can remember what you read and study....

"You are more confident because people now look to you for leadership and for ideas...they believe in you...because you believe in yourself....

"You are more confident because you now ignore little things...your mind is too busy with important...with enjoyable matters....

"You are more confident because your mind is clear...you know what you want...you know what is important...mind is no longer cluttered with minutia....

"You are more confident because you are selecting activities which appeal to you and which you can do well...and which attract attention....

"You feel more confident because people are noticing you...they are impressed by you...your personality...your poise...your ability....

"You are more confident because you are achieving more...your work is more satisfying...you are beginning to attract attention and praise....

"You feel more confident...your self-esteem is higher because you are involved in a number of self-actualizing activities...you are experiencing joy and satisfaction from your experiences....

"You are more confident because you are becoming more creative... you worry less about the merits of an activity...you get an idea, you try it...you don't worry about consequences....

"You are more confident because you feel less threat from others... you see them as friends not as competitors....

"You are more confident because you are now able to ignore the pettiness in others...you can't be bothered with little things...with jealousies or resentments...these are energy-consuming...you need your energy for more important things."

If the client has responded to this approach he will be fully relaxed and very comfortable. He may even resist being aroused. He should be given a few minutes in which to arouse and not be rushed. This may be done by using a counting procedure. "You now feel very comfortable, and you have excellent control of your mind and muscles. It is now near the time to terminate the session. I shall count backwards from ten to one. Upon reaching the number one you will be fully aroused and prepared to leave."

Follow-up and Other Considerations

The relaxation process is only one of many techniques available to the counselor. Like every other approach, it has some definite limitations.

It is not intended as an adequate system in its abbreviated form for individuals with serious mental or emotional disturbances. It does, however, have value with the reasonably well-adjusted individual whose primary need is one of encouragement and direction and whose goal is personal growth.

Relatively few sessions should be required to learn this system, and the client should be able to profit from his ability to relax almost immediately. It is the newly-discovered strength within himself that provides him a source of satisfaction and the ability with which to approach and deal with his problems more confidently and realistically.

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